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## CICERO AS A WIT

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An acquaintance even with the few orations of Cicero that are most commonly read and with the selections from his philosophical writings that generally have a place in advanced Latin courses will make it possible to understand the reason why, in modern as in ancient times, so high a rank has been assigned to him as a master of style. The reading of his letters strengthens our appreciation of his power over language, while at the same time it affords fascinating, if disconcerting, glimpses of his personality. Many of the letters are pervaded by a genial pleasantry, and there are flashes of humor, as well as biting sarcasm, in the speeches; but though we think of Cicero as an adept in the use of invective and in the subtle art of ingratiating, though his pre-eminence as a model of rotund expression is rarely challenged, men now-a-days do not often speak of him as a wit. Nevertheless, if we wish to picture to ourselves Cicero as he appeared to his contemporaries we must conceive of him not merely as a man of letters and of affairs with an extraordinary power of persuasion, but also as endowed with an acute sense of the ridiculous and a gift of repartee unequalled among Roman orators.

Quintilian records the view that Cicero was too much given to raising a laugh, both outside of court and in his speeches; but the professor of rhetoric freely acknowledges his own appreciation of the orator's wit. "In my opinion," he declares (vi. 3. 3), "whether I am judging rightly or whether I am led astray by too great love of the consummate master of eloquence, there was in him a marvelous vein of wit; for his ordinary conversation abounded in pleasantry, while in disputes and in examining witnesses he uttered more witticisms than any other orator, and he credits to others the dull jests in the process against Verres,<sup>1</sup> introducing them as evidence, so that the

<sup>1</sup> Vulgar puns on the name (*verres* = "boar") introduced, as Cicero explains, in order to show in what low esteem Verres was held by the people, who were using his name in connections implying hatred and contempt. Cf. *In Verr.* act II. i. 121; Quint. *Inst. orat.* vi. 3. 55; also, Plut. *Cic.* 7.

more commonplace they are the easier it is to believe that they were not original with him but were already current." Macrobius, though speaking from the point of view of an antiquarian, characterized the orator as "most ready" in his wit "as in all else" (*Sat.* ii. 3. 1).

The gift of repartee not infrequently leads its possessor into the temptation of inopportune use and exposes him to the danger of unpopularity. We are not surprised, therefore, to find evidence that Cicero, who was as vivacious as he was sensitive, sometimes indulged in witticisms to his hurt. The assertions of Plutarch are often to be taken with a grain of salt; but there is no good reason to doubt that he was reproducing statements of a well-informed earlier author when he wrote (*Cicero* 5): "Cicero's manner of delivery contributed much to his persuasiveness, and he would ridicule orators that spoke with a loud voice, saying that on account of weakness they had recourse to shouting, just as lame men take to riding horseback. The readiness and sharpness of such wit seemed clever and well suited to the courts, but by giving it too free exercise he hurt the feelings of many and gained the reputation of being malicious." In a later chapter (27) Plutarch returns to the same topic, remarking that the orator incurred enmity by his readiness to turn upon anyone for the sake of a laugh, and giving examples of his stinging personal jests. To Marcus Aquinius, for instance, who had two sons-in-law in exile, Cicero gave the ill-omened nickname of Adrastus. When he was a candidate for the consulship Lucius Cotta, a man given to drink, was censor; Cicero having quenched his thirst with water said to the friends who were with him, "You may well fear that the censor will be angry with me because I drink water." Marcus Gellius, who was thought to have sprung from a low parentage, had read some letters in the Senate with a loud and penetrating voice; "Do not wonder," said Cicero, "he belongs in the class of public criers!" Still more irritating, we may believe, was the jibe at the expense of Faustus Sulla, the son of the dictator whose proscriptions and sales of confiscated goods were still a bitter memory; the younger Sulla, having wasted his estate, was subsequently forced to advertise property for sale at public auction, whereupon Cicero observed that he liked the son's bulletin much better than those of the father

We are not permitted, however, to assume either that Cicero's habitual use of wit was due to a lack of perception, or that his indulgence in sarcasm outside of court evidenced an intentional disregard of others' sensibilities. Nearly a fourth of the second book of the *De oratore* (chaps. 54-71) is devoted to a discussion of the kinds and uses of wit, and the restrictions that should be put upon its exercise are briefly set forth, for the public speaker in the *Orator* (chap. 26), and for the intercourse of common life in the first book of the *De officiis* (chap. 29). The passage in the *De oratore* and that in the sixth book of Quintilian (chap. 3) contain the best treatment of the subject to be found in ancient writings on rhetoric, and the latter freely acknowledges indebtedness to the former. Consistently with the requirements of the form of dialogue exemplified in the *De oratore*, Cicero puts his discussion of wit into the mouth of C. Julius Caesar Strabo, but it is none the less plain that he is presenting his own views. He speaks slightly, and not without humor, of the Greek works on the subject, finding the cause of their defectiveness in the impossibility of formulating rules of practice to govern the use of wit, similar to those that were laid down for other forms of expression.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in the theoretical part of his argument he follows the Greeks, agreeing in vital points with Aristotle, while the illustrations, which are numerous and apt,<sup>2</sup> are taken chiefly from Roman sources. Evidently, then, as early as 55 B. C., the date of the dialogue, Cicero had given close and, to a degree, independent, study to the subject of wit.

A full analysis of his argument cannot be presented here; but we may examine a few passages which serve to indicate his point of view.

<sup>1</sup> Ego vero, inquit (Caesar), omni de re facitius puto posse ab homine non inurbano, quam de ipsis facetiis disputari; itaque cum quosdam Graecos inscriptos libros esse vidissem de ridiculis, non nullam in spem veneram posse me ex eis aliquid discere . . . sed qui eius rei rationem quandam conati sunt artemque tradere, sic insulsi exstiterunt, ut nihil aliud eorum nisi insulsitas rideatur; qua re mihi quidem nullo modo videtur doctrina ista res posse tradi.

<sup>2</sup> This is the first of the series, illustrating quickness and spontaneity of retort: said Marcius Philippus to Quintus Catulus the father (*catulus*="puppy"), "Why are you barking, Catulus (quid latras, Catule)?" "I see a thief," was the rejoinder, with a hint in regard to Marcius Philippus' public career which in these days needs no comment.

As other ancient writers, so of course Cicero was at a loss to explain the nature of laughter:

Atque illud primum, quid sit ipse risus, quo pacto concitetur, ubi sit, quo modo exsistat atque ita repente erumpat, ut eum cupientes tenere nequeamus, et quo modo simul latera, os, venas, oculos, vultum occupet, viderit Democritus; neque enim ad hunc sermonem hoc pertinet, et si pertineret, nescire me tamen id non puderet, quod ne illi quidem scirent, qui pollicerentur.

This is not surprising when we remember the diversity of the modern theories which have been developed, in the light of present knowledge of physiology and psychology, to explain the same phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

Following Aristotle, Cicero finds the sphere of the ludicrous in shortcomings and defects, in that which may be pointed out as discreditable in a manner that is not discreditable. It is quite within the province of the public speaker to excite laughter, either in order to win favor—for mirth is contagious—or to arouse admiration for cleverness, to disconcert and discredit an opponent or to relax tension, and to counteract the effect of an argument that cannot be refuted. In the use of wit, however, the orator must be extremely careful not to overstep the bounds. Wickedness and misery are not proper subjects for ridicule; and above all else one should have regard for the feelings of those who are dear to him. The most fertile field for jesting lies in the faults that appear in men's lives; bodily defects also afford suitable material, but the public speaker must be on his guard, first that his jokes be not insipid, then that he himself always maintain his dignity and never descend to the level of the clown.

Cicero felt the distinction which we make between wit and humor; yet he is not altogether consistent in the use of terms, and he gives to the personal and satiric element a prominence which would hardly be thought consistent with modern standards. In this he reflects a national tendency; and it was also natural for him, writing from the point of view of a public speaker, to discuss more fully the uses of banter and raillery than of sustained pleasantry. The point of a witticism lies, he tells us, in some fact or made-up story, that is, in the matter, or in the form of expression; but into the discussion of the varieties into which each kind is subdivided we need not enter.

A hint of the limit to which raillery may be permitted to go in private life is given in the story told (*De orat.* ii. 246) of a certain Appius

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, xiv; Sully, *An Essay on Laughter*, vi.

who said to a one-eyed friend, Sextius, "I'll come and dine with you, for I see there's room for one." Cicero censures the jest as scurrilous because calculated to give needless pain and as having at the same time the appearance of premeditation—the same joke might be made at the expense of any one-eyed person; he commends the wit of Sextius, who instantly replied: "Wash your hands, and come to dinner." In the *De officiis*, which was written eleven years later, and was for the most part a free adaptation of a Greek treatise by Panaetius, the distinction is sharply drawn between wit that is refined, keen, and clean and that which is low, boorish, and disgraceful: "Just as we do not allow children in their sport a free rein, but limit them to fair plays, so in our joking we should suffer only the light of an upright nature to shine forth." Admirable as the restraint of wit seemed to be in theory, in practice, our author confesses (*De orat.* ii. 221) it is a very different matter: "For men who are witty and sharp of tongue it is extremely difficult to make an account of men and of seasons and hold back the bright sayings that come into their minds."

Already in 54 B. C., in the oration for Gnaeus Plancius (§ 35) we find Cicero complaining, with an air of evident self-satisfaction, that it was the fashion to attribute to him the jokes that gained currency in Rome; three years later (*Ad fam.* vii. 32) he playfully charges Volumnius with disloyalty in not defending his reputation against the *bons-mots*, "all sayings of all men," that were being circulated in his name. In a letter to Paetus (*Ad fam.* ix. 16) we are told that Caesar was making a collection of apothegms, and that, when sayings of Cicero were brought to him, he professed to be able to tell—by the ring, as it were—which were genuine; another collection of Cicero's sayings had previously been made by Trebonius (*Ad fam.* xv. 21; 47 B. C.).

After Cicero's death a collection of his witticisms was circulated, arranged in three books; by some it was thought to be the work of his freedman Tiro. This was used by Quintilian, who expresses the wish that a smaller number had been saved and better judgment shown in the selection. It was known also to Macrobius, who was influenced by it in declaring (*Sat.* ii. 1. 10) that Plautus and Cicero surpassed all other Romans in the quality of their jokes.

This collection is probably the chief source of a half hundred

witticisms attributed to Cicero, but not found in his works, which have been preserved chiefly by Quintilian, Plutarch, and Macrobius; they are conveniently brought together among the *Fragmenta* in the editions of Cicero's works by Baiter and Kayser (Vol. XI) and C. F. W. Mueller (Part IV, Vol. III). A few derive their force from a play upon words, and are hardly translatable; the character of the rest may be inferred from those already quoted (p. 4) and the examples which follow.

Quintus Cicero, the orator's brother, was a small man, and in the province of Asia, of which he was governor, a half-length portrait was painted representing him in heroic size; on seeing it the orator exclaimed, "The half of my brother is greater than the whole!" Piso, a son-in-law, had a languid gait; Cicero's daughter, however, stepped more briskly; "Walk as your husband does!" said the father—a rebuke all the more effective because indirect (Macr. *Sat.* ii. 3. 4, 16).

Cicero was dining out, and the host, Damasippus, had some inferior wine brought on, at the same time saying "Drink this Falernian, it's forty years old!" "It bears its age well!" said the guest, as he tasted it (Macr. ii. 3. 2). He was on bad terms with Publius Vatinius, and was not cordial toward Marcus Crassus. The latter, before setting out on that disastrous expedition to the East, thought it better to leave Cicero a friend rather than an enemy, and expressed a wish to come over and dine with him; the orator received him courteously. A few days later some of Cicero's friends interceded for Vatinius, saying that he desired a reconciliation, "What," said the orator, "does Vatinius also want to dine at my house?" (Plut. *Cic.* 26).

The same Vatinius was troubled with lameness, and remarked, apparently in a tone that anticipated a compliment, that he was now walking two miles a day; "Of course," said Cicero, "the days are longer!" (Quint. *Inst. orat.* vi. 3. 77). Through the favor of Caesar, at the end of the year 47 B. C. Vatinius was raised to the consulship for a few days to fill a vacancy. Cicero's comment was, "A wonderful thing happened in the year of Vatinius, for in that consulship there was neither winter nor spring nor summer nor autumn." Just afterward Vatinius complained of not receiving a call, whereupon Cicero offered the excuse, "I wished to come in your consulship, but the night overtook me" (Macr. *Sat.* ii. 3. 5).

A still shorter term of service as consul was that of Caninius Rebilus. Q. Fabius Maximus the consul died on the last day of December, 45 B. C., and Caesar had Rebilus installed to fill the vacancy for the few remaining hours of the day. Cicero made merry over the proceeding, saying that Rebilus had caused the question to be raised in whose consulship he was consul; also "We have a watchful consul in Caninius; during his consulship he did not see sleep" (Macr. ii. 3. 6).

The orator's feeling toward Caesar found vent in several sayings, of which a couple may be quoted here. A native of Laodicea meeting Cicero in Rome stated that he had come to Caesar as an envoy on behalf of the liberty of his state; "If you happen to find it," said Cicero, "act as envoy for us also." Cicero was requested to aid a man to secure a seat in the council of a municipal town. Having in mind Caesar's enlargement of the Senate he replied, "The man shall have what you ask at Rome, if you like, but it's a hard matter to secure this privilege at Pompeii" (Macr. *Sat.* ii. 3. 11, 12).

But he was no less sharp toward Pompey. After the rupture between the two leaders he said, "There is one whom I must flee, there is no one whom I can follow." After much hesitation he joined Pompey, and when told that he was late in coming he replied, "Not at all late have I come; for I find nothing ready here." To Pompey, inquiring where his son-in-law Dolabella was, he answered, "with your father-in-law." On learning that Pompey had granted the Roman citizenship to a deserter from the opposite side he exclaimed bitterly, "Fine fellow this! He is promising to Gauls citizenship in a foreign state, and is unable to give our own back to us!" (Macr. *Sat.* ii. 3. 7).

Marcus Appius introduced a plea with the statement that his friend had begged him to expend upon the case all resources of care, eloquence, and fidelity. "Have you become so hard-hearted," interrupted Cicero, "as not to do a single one of the things which your friend asked you to do?" On another occasion Publius Cotta, who wished to be thought an able lawyer, was on the witness stand. To some question of Cicero he answered that he knew nothing about the matter; "Perhaps," said Cicero, "you think that I am questioning you about points of law." The orator's most famous retort in court, however, was probably that with which he turned upon Horten-



sus at the trial of Verres. Hortensius had been persuaded to appear in behalf of Verres, influenced, it would seem, by several considerations but in some degree by the gift of an ivory sphinx from Verres himself. Cicero threw out several dark hints to puzzle Hortensius, who at length exclaimed, "I don't know how to solve riddles." "And yet," was the reply, "you have a sphinx in your house!" (Plut. *Cic.* 7. 26).

In the orations that are extant there are other instances of the use of wit in court, as in the speech *Pro L. Flacco* (§ 47). Cicero is trying to impeach the testimony of Heraclides, a teacher of rhetoric; having traced the checkered career of the witness he adds: "For that rhetorician had as pupils wealthy young fellows, whom he left a half more stupid than when he took them in charge; yet he was not able to carry infatuation to a point where anybody would intrust him with money!"

But we must reserve for another occasion a study of the witticisms in Cicero's own writings. If the collection of fugitive jests cited by ancient writers should ever come to light, we may doubt whether it would add anything to the orator's fame. For one who has not only examined the remnants of this collection but has read Cicero's other writings with an appreciation of his treatment of the ludicrous will, I think, concede that his reputation as a wit was not without adequate foundation. The present age shrinks from the use of jests directed at bodily defects, and in some other respects there has been a change in standards of taste; yet there is enough of the universal element in Cicero's witticisms to give him a leading place in the list of public men who have been able to use their wit with telling effect, in both public and private life; and it would not be easy to find another writer on wit who by his witticisms so well illustrates his treatment of the subject.